

<crew talk>

Q: This is oral history #421. The following oral history interview was conducted by Jack A. Green and Commander Judith Leflore, [ph?] U.S. Naval Reserve, for the National Park Service USS Arizona Memorial and the Naval Historical Center at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 6, 2001, at 7:15 p.m. The person being interviewed is Douglas Billingsly Smith, who was a fireman first class on the USS Downes on December 7, 1941. As I said, we're going through some basic questions just for the record to start. For the record, please state your full name, place of birth and birth date.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Uh.. My name is Douglas Billingsly Smith. I was born in uh.. Denver, Colorado, 1922, February the 22nd.

Q: Okay. What did you consider your hometown in 1941?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: My hometown I considered San Antonio, Texas.

Q: Okay. What were your parents' names?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, Virginia B. and John L. Smith.

Q: Okay. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I have one sister.

Q: Okay. Where did you go to high school?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Thomas Jefferson High School in San Antonio, Texas.

Q: Okay. Where and why did you enlist in the United States Navy?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, I guess I could say I wasn't much of a- a studious person. I went to three months of junior college at- in San Antonio. I— I had a scholarship to Texas University but I just wasn't the studious type and I f- kinda felt that if I joined the navy I could see the world back then and I did.

Q: So what date did you enlist in the United States Navy?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: April 1st, 1940.

Q: 1940-- And this was in San Antonio.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes.

Q: Where did you go to boot camp?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: San Diego, California.

Q: Okay. And when did you graduate from boot camp? Was it six week or eight week—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Uh.. It was eight weeks.

Q: Okay. What was your first duty assignment after getting out of boot camp?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Uh.. Just for the transportation out to the USS Downes who was-- The ship Downes was in uh.. Hawaiian detachment.

Q: So basically you were assigned to the Downes straight out of boot camp.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, yes.

Q: Okay. Then how did you get to the Downes? How did--

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I was on a destroyer. Uh.. They took us out. I don't know how many but- and I was transported out from San Diego to Pearl Harbor.

Q: So when did you arrive on board the Downes approximately?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, I figure I came aboard uh.. about early June.

Q: Of 1940?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Forty-- Nineteen forty.

Q: Of 1940.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes.

Q: So you'd been on board the ship approximately 18 months—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: That's correct.

Q: --by the time they attacked—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes.

Q: --that place.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes.

Q: So when you arrived about the Downes-- What happened to you when you reported on board the Downes? What was-- What happened to you?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, I- I was on the deck force for a little while and then I was assigned to the engine room and I- that's where I was and I had been for the rest of my life on- as a mer- as a navy person.

Q: Did you volunteer to be a black shoe sailor?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, yes.

Q: Oh, you wanted to do that—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes.

Q: So you wanted to strike in a black shoe rate.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah, that's right.

Q: Okay. All right. Now what did you feel about Pearl Harbor when you were stationed? You were a very young man, things of that nature. Were you pleased to be there in Hawaii?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, definitely. I never really left the United States for any reason and of course with bein' a young sailor like you- you said I enjoyed it. It was really enjoyable uh.. and I toured all of Oahu in- in my time off on the weekends in our uh.. cruises around the islands at Lahaina Roads and- and the early part of '41 we made a cruise to Sidney, Australia, and like I said that's the start of my uh.. sea duty and I- I have seen it all.

Q: Okay. Now on December 6 you had been onboard the ship approximately 18 months. Did you have duty that Saturday or did you have liberty?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I had liberty. I- I was playin' for the uh.. semi pro team there in- in Honolulu at Bony Ranch Sandwiches [ph?].

Q: Okay.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: And I had a game that night, the sixth of December, and I broke my nose in the basketball game and then I came back aboard ship that night.

Q: Who were you playing where there was--

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I don't remember the team <overlapping> I was playin' against. No.

Q: So you had broken your nose. Did you go to sick bay or did you—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: No. I- I was- figured-- They just taped it up and figured I'd go to sick bay Monday--

Q: Oh, okay. So you—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: --on the eighth.

Q: So you arrived back aboard the Downes at approximately what time that night?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, I imagine it was close to midnight.

Q: Close to midnight.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah.

Q: Okay. Now she is in dry dock with the caisson and they're just forward of the Pennsylvania. How long has she been in dry dock by the time—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I think we've been in there maybe about a week or ten days. We were going through overhaul there in Pearl and of course the engines and everything were out of commission. They even had our guns out of commission. We had no firing pins in the five-inch 38s that we had aboard.

Q: So as a part of the refit your workload must have been very high as a fireman. There's probably things to clean and inspect—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, yes. I was jack of all trades down below yet.

Q: As well, yeah-- A young seaman—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Whatever they wanted me to do I did it.
<laughs>

Q: Okay. Now what was your first indication that there was attack? You'd obviously gone to sleep I'm sure and—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, I did, but I had- I had a paper route. I was delivering the Honolulu Star-Bulletin to four destroyers and I had just finished going to the other three ships and I was talking to the chief on the quarter deck, and it was close to eight o'clock or right around 0800 and we both noticed these planes diving on Ford Island. And I don't know whether he said it I said it. I said, "Well, they're- how are they practicing on Sundays? It's a holiday," and then we both spotted the meatball at the same time on the side of the planes, and I immediately ran down to the engineering department to hold reveille. And I more or less got kicked out of there 'cause, you know, back in those days there was no reveille on Sunday so you can sleep as long as you want.

Q: That's right.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: And they were cursin' me and all that, tryin'- you know, when I was tryin' to get 'em up until the general alarm sounded and then they started moving.

Q: Okay. So once the general alarm goes off, you go to your battle station—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Battle station.

Q: --which was—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Would have been the engine room but the engine rooms were out of commission, and then they- when they knew that they were- we were under attack they had most of the engineering department belting 50 caliber belts, machine gun belts, 'cause that's all we could fire was the 50 calibers.

Q: Sure.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: And that's what we were doin' on deck was belting those and pannin' 'em up to the fifties as- as they used 'em.

Q: So you were doing that for how long? You were doing that when the explosion of course.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah. We uh.. I don't know how long we did it but if I can remember it correctly they had gun four- finally got the firing pin on gun four and got off one or two rounds and then they took a direct hit there--

Q: Yes.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: --and that's when the acting captain said to abandon ship and- which we did and uh..

Q: How did you abandon the ship? How-- What was—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: We had one gangway goin' off and of course it was a mad rush to get off of there, and uh.. one little story: A gentleman but [ph?] not a gentleman sailor first class water tender, his name was Pig Reece, [ph?] and if he's still alive he's gonna flip when he hears this. He weighed about 325 pounds. Well, I was 155 pounds, 19 years old, and I had just come out of junior college, playin' basketball and all that. I could run. I was runnin' <laughter> and he passed me up like I was standin' still. I have never forgotten that. <laughter> And then I found out later one of our stewards had been stopped at the main gate and a marine asked him where he was goin' and he says, "Hell, I'm runnin' 'til the land gives out." <laughter> So there were some, you know, jokes or somethin' to this stuff even though it got pretty heavy and pretty bad.

Q: Adrenaline does strange things.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, yes, it does, especially when you're young.

Q: Yes. So after you run from the ship where did you go then?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: We just milled around 'til the- some of the people got us together. All the nonrated types like myself were issued uh.. 30 uh.. 30 ought sixes and that evening we had- all the survivors off the battleships and all that spent the night at Block Recreation Center, and they gave all of us mattresses and we slept on the bowling alleys that night, and about two or three o'clock in the morning--I don't know--early in the morning somebody rolled a bowling ball down one of the alleys and of course here's a thousand survivors comin' [ph?] out of there like they were shot out of a cannon. They thought we were under attack again.

Q: Gosh.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I was put on another destroyer that afternoon.

Q: Which destroyer were you put on?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: It's-- It was the Benham [ph?] destroyer 411. Yes.

Q: Okay, and then once on board the Benham did you sortie with the Benham--

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Uh.. We went out to sea for two weeks. All the clothes I had on was on my back. That was it. I had no other clothes, and uh.. another kind of a- a thing to get across: I'd been out there about ten days and I was on the uh.. bridge and uh.. one J-V phones which goes to- directly to the engineering spaces and the captain says- asked me-- He said, "You're a survivor from the Downes," and I said, "Yes, Sir," and he said, "You know, that's all you have on, isn't it, and nothing else?" and I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Well, go down to my stateroom and help yourself to some clothes. Get somethin' else on." So I went down there and I came back up on the bridge. I had a brown tweed suit with vest on and my white hat <laughter> but we were out two weeks when we came back in.

Q: Okay. So did you stay aboard the Benham for that—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes, I stayed aboard the Benham and we—

Q: You must have gone-- Did you get a new sea bag issue or did—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, I got a partial sea bag come November 14 and 15 in '42. We were uh.. went in to action off of Guadalcanal and I got sunk on the Benham. The Benham went down that night about midnight and we were- we were about ten hours in the water 'fore the other destroyer, Gwin [ph?], picked us up, and out of the four destroyers three of us were sunk.

Q: That's right.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah.

Q: So after being picked up by the Gwin what did you do then?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, I went down to Espirito Santos [ph?] and then uh.. I uh.. stayed down there and I was put aboard the Anderson. Uh.. I can't remember the number but after I'd been aboard about three months there was a- a dispatch put out to all hands there. Anybody that had been sunk twice or more could get new construction back in the States so I immediately went to the exec and said, "Look. I'm out of here." So I got orders to go back home, back to the States, for new construction.

Q: What new construction were you assigned to?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I was assigned in Bremer- at Tacoma, Washington, to a baby flattop and I got 30 days' survivor's leave and I went home to see my folks.

Q: Now which baby flattop were you assigned to?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: It was-- It was the-- It was called Lapidus [ph?] and we uh. put her in commission and we took it around to New York and gave it to the British through the canal, and I thought "well, this is gonna be good duty the rest of the war; I'm just gonna make deliveries from Seattle and Tacoma, Washington, to New York City." Well little did I know, and then I

was assigned to the Wake Island CV-65 and stayed on her for about- oh, about a year and then I got orders to go to the USS Randolph CV-15.

Q: The new Essex class carrier.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: The Essex [ph?] class carrier and put her in commission in 1944.

Q: So you were a plank owner on the Randolph.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: A plank owner on the Randolph and then we didn't even go through under way training. We went straight through the canal and out to the war zone.

Q: Oh, my gosh.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: And uh.. well, uh.. we were in Mognog [ph?] one night. We were the fleet anchor. We got hit with a kamikaze. We lost 30 or 40 men and about 15 or 20 aircraft and we were off in Japan with our <clears throat>planes doing our thing over Japan over Tokyo and all that and- when the war ended.

Q: Okay. So you end the war on board the USS Randolph—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah. If I-- Can I go back a little bit?

Q: Sure can. This is your interview.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I-- On the Benham we went to the Midway battle. We were in the Midway battle and when the Yorktown got sunk we picked up 700 survivors off of her, transferred [ph?] 'em that evening to the cruiser. I can't remember the name of the cruiser, and we patrolled with the Yorktown tryin' to keep her alive, keep her afloat. The Hammond went alongside of her and she got two torpedoes and- when the- some submarine snuck in and got two fish out and one in the Hammond, and we picked up 150 survivors of them and we were told to go on home, back to Pearl. We broke off from the task group because we had all these people and they were

bedridden. They were-- You know, the depth charges went off and messed up their stomachs so we went in to Pearl ahead of everybody, and of course we got welcomed by Nimitz, our skipper, Captain Worthington [ph?]. He got off on-- I remember he got off on the dock there and Nimitz was there and one of 'em saluted. Worthington had his hand out and then Nimitz had his hand out and Worthington saluted. They couldn't get together so <laughs> finally they did, and we had about 30 ambulances there and they had to cut the stern off of the hatch there to get all these people out.

Q: Oh, my gosh.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: and then later on I was then on with the Doolittle deal going to Japan—

Q: That's right, April of 1942.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: --went on destroyer escort in- to the- with the Hornet and- when they uh.. did that, and uh.. then we came back and I went to the Randolph and I ended up in World War II on Randolph.

Q: Now what was your highest rate at the end of the second world war?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I was chief petty officer, chief machinist's mate.

Q: Chief machinist's mate so you ended the war as a chief.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Uh huh.

Q: Okay. Now you've told me that you were a career navy man.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes.

Q: Could you just very briefly give your subsequent career after that, just the highlights just very briefly?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, <sighs> when I left Randolph-- We went out of commission in '48 in Philadelphia and I went to a- another destroyer down in Norfolk, went on a Mediterranean cruise, came back then I was assigned to another destroyer up in Newport, Rhode Island, and I made a Mediterranean cruise with that one, came back and then I was assigned to- finally got shore duty recruiting back in my hometown of San Antonio, Texas. I was back there a year when I found out I made warrant and I went back to Houston main office to get sworn in. And the uh.. when I got back I got a call from the bureau, my type desk officer, and he told me-- He says, "What ship do you want?" and I said, "Wait a minute. I've only been here a year. I rate two years here," and he said, "Well, you came as enlisted. Now you're an officer. You're going back to sea." So I said, "Okay. Give me a tanker out of Long Beach" and that's what I got, and I was on a- a couple of tankers, and I- I won't go in- delve in to the whole situation but uh.. my- I ended up in- back to where I started in recruit training command in San Diego. I was in charge of all the uh.. chiefs and first class that were company commanders 'til I retired there in 1970.

Q: So you retired in 1970.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah, and I could go in a little more detail about Korea and Viet Nam but—

Q: We're talking about Pearl Harbor but—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah. Let's stay with Pearl Harbor for a while.

Q: Yeah, that's right. So you retired as a master chief?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: No. I retired as a lieutenant commander.

Q: Lieutenant commander. Okay.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yeah, I'm a mustang.

Q: I understand. Okay. Lieutenant commander in 1970. Okay. As a young sailor here in Pearl Harbor, what did you do for recreation? Did you go to Hotel Street or were there other things that you—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes, I went to Hotel Street and uh.. myself and two or three other shipmates we bought an old 1936 Nash for ten dollars. We split two dollars and a half apiece and we would cruise the island on weekends and we'd go around the island and we'd stop and sleep on the beach, you know, and swim. Uh.. To me Hawaii's wonderful. Back then it was perfect. I can- I can remember where only the Ala Moana and the Royal Hawaiian was on Waikiki and there was nothing else. Take a look at it now.

Q: It's all built up.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, man.

Q: Now did the Downes had a favorite bar? Many ships would have their own favorite bar that they would congregate. Did the Downes have one and do you—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes, they had one. I do not know the name. I don't remember it.

Q: Okay. Where was it? I understand ships had- tended to-- Was it on Hotel Street or was it—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes. Yes.

Q: Okay. So—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: All the ships had their own hotels or whatever you want—

Q: Bars that they would hang out--

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Bars.

Q: --and places they would hang out—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Yes.

Q: --things of that nature. Did you ever see the Downes again after you left—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: No, but I heard she'd went back in commission and uh.. but no, I never did see her again.

Q: Okay. So you're home for 18 months. Now any of your personal effects or things that are on the Downes-- Did you ever get those back?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: No, nothing.

Q: Nothing—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I got a-- like I said a partial sea bag when I was on Benham and then when I got sunk on Benham I—

Q: Got a full sea bag.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: --didn't have any, had to start over, and I got back to the States with uh.. a set of blues and some skivvies and that's about it 'til I got back to uh.. San Francisco.

Q: What are your most poignant memories here in Hawaii as a young sailor? When you think about that time what comes to mind the most?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Well, I guess you could say the uh.. so- so-called freedom because, you know, we were uh.. we weren't in any kind of a- a war situation or anything like that. It was strictly uh.. We had if I remember right two out of three, had duty one day and two days off, and you could go ashore at four o'clock, 1600, every day and then you'd get two weekends off, and of course we went to- went sw- swimmin'. My gosh. Swimmin' by that-, you know, and went cruising the island in our car and—

Q: That was an easy duty. It sounds like very nice duty.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: And of course I wasn't old enough to drink so I didn't- didn't get to do that 'til I turned 21. <laughs> Yeah, but there— No. I liked it. I thought this-- And I still like this Haw- Hawaii. This is very, very nice.

Q: Some accounts-- Your fellow black shoe sailors-- I've heard many sailors here, especially the married ones, wanted to be back in San Diego, that they felt that there wasn't really all that much to do here in Hawaii. Amongst your peers down in the engine room, what was the consensus? Did most of them like being in Hawaii or are there are some—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Uh.. Back then uh.. the navy didn't want you to get married.

Q: Yes.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Uh.. I think it was second class and above if you got married you'd get a- a BAQ uh.. up 'til second class. No. You didn't-- They didn't want you to get married. In fact, the word was if they wanted you to get married they would have issued you a woman and the sea bag <laughter> so it was quite a while before a lot of us got married, and most of the people that were married had 'em out here. I mean the wives were out here. They wasn't any housing to speak of back in those days but you could live on really nothing.

Q: Now the navy you retired from in 1970 in many ways is very different than the navy you enlisted in, in 1940.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Definitely.

Q: What do you think was the most striking difference between the two navies that you recall and which one did you think was better or- and for what reason or how would you compare the two?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: That'd be a hard question to answer. One of the main things of course: Thirty years in the navy I knew what discipline was and all that bit and the chain of command and all that, but back in '70 it started to change. They were allowing civilian clothes to be worn off of ships and they could grow beards and I- I was still basically from the old navy and I couldn't under- I couldn't see that and I said, when I retired, I said to myself, "I'm sure glad I got out now 'cause—" And discipline was just really goin' downhill.

Q: That's right. It's a very different navy.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, yes, it is, but these modern ships today are unreal. I- I went aboard one three years ago when we came out here to Hawaii and it was uh.. I don't know what the nomenclature was but she carried 36 surface-to-air missiles. It was a destroyer and I got a tour of the engine room. Back in my days in order to get under way it would take us four hours and I asked them down there-- I said, "How long does it take you to get under way with these?" 'cause they had these big turbines, which is the same uh.. aircraft engine on a C-5, and they said, "Well, we could do 30 knots in about 90 seconds," and I just couldn't believe it.

Q: Oh, times have changed.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Oh, man, and of course another thing that kinda blew my mind: I said that-- A lieutenant took us around and he says, "The- There's only two ways to get paid on here," and I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, you have allotment goin' back home or to your wife. Then we have an ATM machine on here and that's how you get paid," and I couldn't believe it 'cause back in my day you had a pay chit and you'd go through the —

Q: Pay call

Douglas Billingsly Smith: --pay line, you know.

Q: Yes, you go to pay call.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: Here now they get paid by ATMs, unbelievable, but that's the new navy.

Q: Colonel La Fleur [ph?], do you have some questions.

Commander Leflore: Yeah, I did. <inaudible>

Q: Okay. And yes, it's a very different—

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I really enjoyed the navy. I have no misgivings. I'd change a couple of things that happened uh.. and all that, uh.. mainly my shore duty and I only had five years out of 25- 30 at- on the beach. I was at sea all this time and it brings up to mind in 1956 when we- I was on a tin can goin' through the Suez Canal. That's when I circumnavigated the world. I had been everywhere in the world. The only country I hadn't been in was Russia but the Mediterranean, South America-- Name it. I have been there, and uh.. that's what I wanted to do when I joined but I didn't realize I was gonna get it <laughs> all.

Q: When you joined the navy did you expect to make it a career?

Douglas Billingsly Smith: No. I thought I'd get out at the end of the war but I ma-- when- I was a chief and I- that to me was the best rate in the navy at that time, and then uh.. when I made warrant that became the-- I uh.. I would have stayed a warrant if they-- They were gonna get rid of the warrants back in that time and I shifted to LDO and then uh.. I couldn't go back to warrant when they decided to keep 'em, but no, I enjoyed it. I-- I had the-- It was just-- To me it was great, you know, the ships I was on and the people I worked with, the officers and the enlisted and all that with me. I made a lot of shipmates, a lot of friends, and I still have some.

Q: Very good.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: We're not-- There's not many of us left now at my age, 84. <laughs>

Q: Not from the 1940 navy. No. There's not.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: That's about right.

Q: All right. Well, thank you very much. This has been a very excellent interview and we've gotten lots of good morsels of information on the time and life of the sailor in 1940 and 1941 so thank you very much.

Douglas Billingsly Smith: I appreciate it, Jack, for-- Thanks for havin' me.

Q: Well, thank you. All right.

End of Tape 421 Douglas Billingsly Smith